EDITORIAL, FINANCIAL AND AUTOMOBILES.

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# MY TRIP TO VERDUN—A DYING, SHELL-RIDDEN CITY

## The Vauban Citadel, in the Shelter of Which Falling Shells Cannot Find You—Houses and Blocks That Are Vanishing Hourly—"But William Will Not Come."

By FRANK H. SIMONDS,
Author of "The Great War."

The citadel of Verdun, the bulwark of the eastern frontier in ancient days, rises out of the meadows of the Meuse with something of the abruptness of the sky-scraper and still preserves that aspect which led the writers of other wars to describe all forts as "frowning." It was built for Louis XIV by Vauban. He took a solid rock and blasted out redoubts and battlements. The generations that followed him dug into the living rock and created within it a whole city of catacombs, a vast labyrinth of passages and chambers and halls; even an elevator was added by the latest engineers, so that one can go from floor to floor, from the level of the meadow to the level of the summit of the rock, possibly a hundred feet above.

By reason of the fact that many correspondents have visited this fortress since the war began the world has come to know of the underground life in Verdun, to think of the city as defended by some wonderful system of subterranean works; to think of Verdun, in fact, as a city or citadel that is defensible either by walls or by forts. But the truth is far different; even the old citadel is but a deserted cave; its massive walls of natural rock resist the shells as they would repulse an avalanche; but the guns that were once on its parapets are gone, the garrison is gone, gone far out on the trench lines beyond the hills. The Vauban citadel is now a place where bread is baked, where wounded men are occasionally brought, where live the soldiers and officers whose important but unromantic mission it is to keep the roads through the town open, to police the ashes of the city, to do what remains of the work that once fell to the lot of the civil authorities.

To glide swiftly to the shelter of this rock from a region in which a falling shell has served to remind you of the real meaning of Verdun of the moment, to leave the automobile and plunge into the welcome obscurity of this cavern—this was perhaps the most comfortable personal incident of the day. The mere shadow of the rock gave a sense of security; to penetrate it was to pass to safety.

### My Host in Verdun.

Some moments of wandering by corridors and stairways into the very heart of the rock brought us to the quarters of our host, General Dubois; to his kind attention I was to owe all my good fortune in seeing his dying city; to him, at the end, I was to owe the ultimate evidence of courtesy, which I shall never forget.

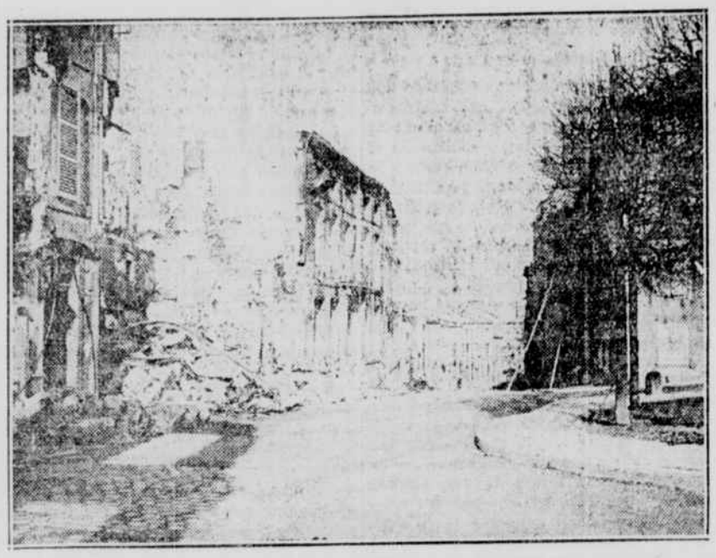
Unlike Pétain or Joffre, General Dubois is a little man, possibly a trifle older than either. A white-haired, bright-eyed, vigorous soldier, who made his real fame in Madagascar with Joffre and with Gallieni, and when the storm broke was sent to Verdun by these men, who knew him, to do the difficult work that there was to be performed behind the battle line. There is about General Dubois a suggestion of the old, as well as the new, of the French general. The private soldiers to whom he spoke as he went his rounds responded with a "Oui, mon Général" that had a note of affection as well as of discipline; he was rather as one fancied were the soldiers of the Revolution, of the Empire, of the Algerian days of Père Bugeaud, whose memory is still green.

Our salutations made, we returned through the winding corridors to inspect the bakeries, the water and light plant, the unsuspected resources of this rock. In one huge cavern we saw the men who provided 30,000 men with bread each day, men working as the stokers in an ocean steamer labor amidst the glare of fires; we tasted the bread and found it good, as good as all French bread is, and that means a little better than all other bread.

Then we slipped back into daylight and wandered along the face of the fortress. We inspected shell holes of yesterday and of last month; we inspected them as one inspects the best blossoms in a garden; we studied the angle at which they dropped; we measured the miniature avalanche that they brought with them. But always, so far, there was the sub-conscious sense of the rock between us and the enemy. I never before understood the full meaning of that phrase "a rock in a weary land."

### A City Dying Hourly.

All this was but preliminary, however. Other automobiles arrived; the general entered one. I followed in the next and we set out to visit Verdun, to visit the ruins, or, rather, to see not a city that was dead, but a city that was visibly, hourly dying—a city that was vanishing by blocks and by squares—but was not yet fallen to the estate of Ypres or Arras; a city that in corners, where there were gardens behind the walls, still smiled; a city where some few brave old buildings still stood four square and solid, but only waiting what was to come.



Houses wrecked by shell-fire at Verdun.

Before I visited Verdun I had seen many cities and towns which had been wholly or partially destroyed, either by shell fire or by the German soldiers in their great invasion before the Marne. One shelled town is much like another, and there is no thrill quite like that you experience when you see the first. But these towns had died nearly two years ago; indeed, in most the resurrection had begun: little red roofs were beginning to shine through the brown trees and stark ruins. Children played again in the squares. It was like the sense you have when you see an old peasant ploughing among the cross-marked graves of a hard fought battle corner—the sense of a beginning as well as of death and destruction.

But at Verdun it was utterly different. Of life, or people, of activity beginning again or surviving there was nothing. Some time in the recent past all the little people who lived in these houses had put upon wagons what could be quickly moved and had slipped out of their home, that was already under sentence of death. They were gone into the distance, and they had left behind them no stragglers. The city was empty save for a few soldiers who passed rapidly along the streets, as one marches in a heavy snowstorm.

### Vagaries of Shell-Fire.

Yet Verdun was not wholly dead. Shell-fire is the most inexplicable of all things that carry destruction. As you passed down one street the mark of destruction varied with each house. Here the blast had come and cut the building squarely; it had carried with it into ruin behind in the courtyard all that the house contained, but against the wall the telephone rested undisturbed; pictures—possibly even a looking glass hung as the inhabitants had left it, hung as perhaps it had hung when the last woman had taken her ultimate hurried glance at her hat before she departed into the outer darkness.

But the next house had lost only the front walls; it stood before you as if it had been opened for your inspection by the removal of the façade. Chairs, beds—all the domestic economy of the house—sagged visibly outward toward the street, or stood still firm, but open to the four winds. It was as if the scene were prepared for a stage and you sat before the footlights looking into the interior. Again, the next house and that beyond were utterly gone—side walls, front walls, everything swallowed up and vanished—the iron work twisted into heaps, the stone work crumbled to dust; the whole mass of ruin still smoked, for it was a shell of yesterday that had done this work.

Down on the Riviera, where the mistral blows—all the pine trees lean away from the invariable track of this storm wind—you have the sense, even in the summer months, of a whole countryside bent by the gales. In the same fashion you felt in Verdun, felt rather than saw, a whole town not bent, but crumpled, crushed—and the line of fall was always apparent; you could tell the direction from which each storm of shells had come, you could almost feel that the storm was but suspended, not over, that at any moment it might begin again.

Yet even in the midst of destruction there were enclaves of unshaken structures. On the Rue Mazel, "Main Street," the chief clothing store rose immune amid ashes on all sides. Its huge plate-glass window was not even cracked. And behind the window a little mannikin, one of the familiar images that wear clothes to tempt the purchase, stood erect. A French soldier had crept in and raised the stiff arm of the mannikin to the salute, pushed back the hat to a rakish angle. The mannikin seemed alive and more than alive, the embodiment of the spirit of the place. Facing northward toward the German guns it seemed to respond to them with a *"morituri salutamus."* "The last civilian in Verdun," the soldiers called him, but his manner was rather that of the Poilu.

### A Factory That Was.

We crossed the river and the canal and stopped by the ruin of what had once been a big factory or warehouse. We crawled through an open shell-made breach in the brick wall and stood in the interior. The ashes were still hot, and in corners there were smoking fires. Two days ago, at just this time, your guides told you, men had been working here; making bread, I think. At the same time we had come to the ruins—the same time of day, that is—the Germans had dropped a half dozen incendiary shells into the building and it had burned in ten minutes. Most of the men who had been there then were still there, under the smoking mass of wreckage; the smell of burned human flesh was in the air.

A few steps away there was a little house standing intact. On the floor there were stretched four rolls of white cloth. The general and those with him took off their hats as they entered. He opened one of the packages and you saw only a charred black mass, something that looked like a half burned log taken from the fireplace. But two days ago it had been a man, and the metal disk of identification had already been found and had served to disclose the victim's name. These were the first bodies that had been removed from the ruins.

Taking our cars again we drove back and stopped before the Mairie, and passing under the arch entered the courtyard. The building had fared better than most, but there were many shell marks. In the courtyard were four guns. Forty-six years before another German army had come down from the North, another whirlwind of artillery had struck the town and laid it in ashes, but even under the ashes the town had held out for three weeks. Afterward the Republic of France had given these guns to the people of Verdun in recognition of their heroism.

### The Fireman of Verdun.

In the courtyard I was presented to a man wearing the uniform and helmet of a fireman. He was the chief of the Verdun fire department. His mission, his perilous duty, it was to help extinguish the fires that flamed up after every shell. In all my life I have never seen a man at once so crushed and so patently courageous. He was not young, but his blue Lorraine eyes were still clear. Yet he looked at you, he looked out upon the world, with undisguised amazement. For a generation his business had been to fight fires. He had protected his little town from conflagrations that might sometimes, perhaps once, possibly twice, have risen to the dignity of a "three alarm." For the rest he had dealt with blazes.

Now out of the skies and the darkness and out of the daylight, too, fire had descended upon his town. Under an avalanche of incendiary shells, under a landslide of fire, his city was melting visibly into ashes. He had lived fire and dreamed fire for half a century, but now the world had turned to fire—his world—and he looked out upon it in dazed wonder. He could no longer fight this fire, restrain it, conquer it; he could only go out under the bursting shells and strive to minimize by some fraction the destruction; but it was only child's play, this work of his which had been a man's business. And there was no mistaking the fact that this world was now too much for him. He was a brave man; they told me of things he had done; but his little cosmos had gone to chaos utterly.

### Where the Crown Prince Did Not Come.

We entered our cars again and went to another quarter of the city. Everywhere were ashes and ruin, but everywhere the sense of a destruction that was progressive, not complete: it still marched. It was as Arras had been, they told me, before the last wall had tumbled and the Artois capital had become nothing but a memory. We climbed the slope toward the cathedral and stopped in a little square still unscathed, the Place d'Armes, the most historic acre of the town. After a moment I realized what my friends were telling me. It was in this square that the Crown Prince was to receive the surrender of the town. Along the road we had climbed he was to lead his victorious army through the town and out the Porte de France beyond. In this square the Kaiser was to stand and review the army to greet his victorious son. The scene as it had been arranged was almost rehearsed for you in the gestures of the French officers.

"But William has not come," they said, "and he will not come now." This last was not spoken as a boast, but as a faith, a conviction.

Still climbing we came to the cathedral. It is seated on the very top pinnacle of the rock of Verdun, suggesting the French cities of Provence. Its two towers, severe and lacking ornamentation, are the landmarks of the countryside for miles around. When I came back to America I read the story of an American correspondent whom the Germans had brought down from Berlin to see the destruction of Verdun. They had brought him to the edge of the hills and then thrown some incendiary shells into the town, the very shells that killed the men whose bodies I had seen. The black smoke and flames rushed up around these towers and then the Germans brought the correspondent over the hills and showed him the destruction of Verdun. He described it vividly and concluded that the condition of the town must be desperate.

### Teutonic Stage Management.

They are a wonderful people, these Germans, in their stage management. Of course this was precisely the thing that they desired that he should feel. They had sent their shells at the right moment, the whole performance had gone off like clockwork. Those poor blackened masses of humanity in the house below were the cost that was represented in the performance. And since there is much still left to burn in Verdun, the Germans may repeat this thing whenever they desire.

But somewhere three or four miles from here, and between Verdun and the Germans, are many thousands of Frenchmen, with guns and cannon, and hearts of even finer metal. They cannot even know that Verdun is being shelled or is burning, and if it burns to ultimate ashes it will not affect them or their lines. This is the fallacy of all the talk of the destruction of Verdun city and the desperate condition of its defenders. The army left Verdun for the hills when the war began; the people left when the present drive began in February. Even the dogs and cats, which were seen by correspondents in earlier visits, have been rescued and sent away. Verdun is dead, it is almost as dead as are Arras and Ypres; but neither of these towns after a year and a half of bombardment has fallen.

The correspondent who was taken up on a hill by the Germans to see Verdun burn, after it had been carefully set on fire by shell fire, was discovered by French gunners and shelled. He went away taking with him an impression of a doomed city. This picture was duly transmitted to America. But two days later, when I visited the city, there was no evidence of desperation, because there was no one left to be desperate. Doubtless on occasion we shall have many more descriptions of the destruction of this town, descriptions meant to impress Americans or encourage Germans. The material for such fires is not exhausted. The cathedral on the top of the hill is hardly shell-marked at all, and it will make a famous display when it is fired as was Rheims, as were the churches of Champagne and Artois. But there is something novel in the thought of a city burned, not to make a Roman or even German holiday, but burned to make the world believe that the Battle of Verdun had been a German victory.

### The Madonna of the Tree.

For two hours we wandered about the town, exploring and estimating the effect of heavy gunfire, for the Germans are too far from the city to use anything but heavy guns effectively. The impressions of such a visit are too numerous to recall. I shall mention but one more. Behind the cathedral are cloisters that the guide books mention; they inclose a courtyard that was once decorated with statues of saints. By some accident or miracle—there are always miracles in shelled towns—one of these images, perhaps that of the Madonna, has been lifted from its pedestal and thrown into the branches of a tree, which seems almost to hold it with outstretched arms.

At length we left the town, going out by the Porte de France, which cuts the old Vauban ramparts, now as deserted as those of Paris, ramparts that had been covered with trees and were now strewn with the débris of the trees that had fallen under the shell fire. In all this time not a shell had fallen in Verdun; it was the first completely tranquil morning in weeks; but there was always the sense of impending destruction, there was always the sense of the approaching shell. There was an odd subconscious curiosity, and something more than curiosity, about the mental processes of some men, not far away, who were beside guns pointed toward you, guns which yesterday or the day before had sent their destruction to the very spot where you stood.

### Fear in the Open.

Yet, oddly enough, in the town there was a wholly absurd sense of security, derived from the fact that there were still buildings between you and those guns. You saw that the buildings went to dust and ashes whenever the guns were fired; you saw that each explosion might turn a city block into ashes, and yet you were glad of the buildings and there was reassurance in their shadows. Now we travelled in the open country; we began to climb across the face of a bare hill, and it was the face that fronted the Germans.

Presently the general's car stuck in the mud and we halted, for a minute perhaps; then we went on; we passed a dead horse lying in the road; then, of a sudden, came that same terrible grinding, metallic crash. I have never seen any description of a heavy shell explosion that fitted it. Behind us we could see the black smoke rising from the ground in a suburb through which we had just come. I saw three explosions. A moment later we were at the gate of Fort de la Chaume, and we were warned not to stop, but to hasten in, for the Germans, whenever they see cars at this point, suspect that Joffre has arrived, or President Poincaré, and act accordingly. We did not delay.

A Verdun block wiped out.

### Fort de la Chaume.

Fort de la Chaume is one of the many fortifications built since the Franco-Prussian War and intended to defend the city. Like all the rest, it ceased to have value when the German artillery had shown at Liège and at Namur that it was the master of the fort. Then the French left their forts and went out to trenches beyond and took with them the heavy guns that the fort once boasted. To-day Fort de la Chaume is just an empty shell, as empty as the old Vauban citadel in the valley below. And what is true of this fort is true of all the other forts of that famous fortress of Verdun, which is no longer a fortress, but a sector in the trench line that runs from the North Sea to Switzerland.

From the walls of the fort staff officers showed me the surrounding country. I looked down on the city of Verdun, hiding under the shadow of its cathedral. I looked across the level Meuse Valley, with its little river; I studied the wall of hills beyond. Somewhere in the tangle on the horizon was Douaumont, which the Germans held. Down the valley of the river in the haze was the town of Bras, which was French; beyond it the village of Vachereauville, which was German. Beyond the hills in the centre of the picture, but hidden by them, were Le Mort Homme and Hill 304.

## War That Is Invisible—A Luncheon Underground with a Toast to America—The Last Courtesy from a General and a Host—Nothing That Was Not Beautiful.

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Verdun is like a lump of sugar in a finger-bowl, and I was standing on the rim. It seemed utterly impossible that any one should even think of this town as a fortress or count its ashes as of meaning in the conflict.

### The War Invisible.

Somewhere in the background a French battery of heavy guns was firing, and the sound was clear; but it did not suggest war, rather a blasting operation. The German guns were still again. There was a faint billowing roll of gunfire across the river toward Douaumont, but very faint. As for trenches, soldiers, evidences of battle, they did not exist. I thought of Ralph Pulitzer's vivid story of riding to the Rheims front in a military aeroplane and seeing, of war, just nothing.

The geography of the Verdun country unrolled before us with absolute clarity; the whole relation of hills and river and railroads was unmistakable. But despite the faint sound of musketry, the occasional roar of a French gun, I might have been in the Berkshires looking down on the Housatonic. Six miles to the north around Le Mort Homme that battle which has not stopped for two months was still going on. Around Douaumont the overture was just starting, the overture to a stiff fight in the afternoon, but of all the circumstances of battle that one has read of, that one still vaguely expects to see, there was not a sign. If it suited their fancy the Germans could turn the hill on which I stood into a crater of ruin, as they did with Fort Loncin at Liège. We were well within range, easy range; we lived because they had no object to serve by such shooting, but we were without even a hint of their whereabouts.

I have already described the military geography of Verdun. I shall not attempt to repeat it here, but it is the invisibility of warfare, whether examined from the earth or the air, which impresses the civilian. If you go to the trenches you creep through tunnels and cavities until you are permitted to peer though a peephole, and you see yellow dirt some yards away. You may hear bullets over your head, you may hear shells passing, but what you see is a hillside with some slashings. That is the enemy. If you go to an observation post back of the trenches, then you will see a whole range of country, but not even the trenches of your own side.

From the Grand Mont east of Nancy I watched some French batteries shell the German line. I didn't see the French guns, I didn't see the German trenches, I didn't see the French line. I did see some black smoke rising a little above the underbrush, and I was told that the shells were striking behind the German lines and that the gunners were searching for a German battery. But I might as well have been observing a gang of Italians at blasting operations in the Montclair mountains. And the officer with me said: "Our children are just amusing themselves."

### A Luncheon Underground.

From Fort de la Chaume we rode back to the citadel; and there I was the guest of the general and the officers of the town garrison; their guest because I was an American who came to see their town. I shall always remember that luncheon down in the very depths of this rock in a dimly lighted room. I sat at the general's right, and all around me were the men whose day's work it was to keep the roads open, the machinery running in the shell-cursed city. Every time they went out into daylight they knew that they might not return. For two months the storm had beaten about this rock, it had written its mark upon all these faces, and yet it had neither extinguished the light nor the laughter; the sense of strength and of calmness was inescapable, and never have I known such charming, such thoughtful hosts.

When the champagne came the old general rose and made me a little speech. He spoke in English, with absolute correctness, but as one who spoke it with difficulty. He welcomed me as an American to Verdun, he thanked me for coming, he raised his glass to drink to my country and the hope that in the right time she would be standing with France—in the cause of civilization. Always in his heart, in his thought, in his speech, the Frenchman is thinking of that cause of civilization; always this is what the terrible conflict that is eating up all France means to him.

Afterward we went out of this cavern into daylight, and the officers came and shook hands with me and said goodby. One does not say *au revoir* at the front; one says *"bonne chance"*—"good luck; it may and it may not—we hope not." We entered our cars and were about to start, when suddenly with a blinding, stunning crash a whole salvo landed in the meadow just beyond the road, we could not see where, because some houses hid the field. It was the most suddenly appalling crash I have ever heard.

Instantly the general ordered our drivers to halt. He explained that it might be the beginning of a bombardment or only a single trial, a detail in the intermittent firing to cut the road that we were to take. We sat waiting for several moments and no more shots came. Then the general turned and gave an order to his car to follow, bade our drivers go fast and climbed into my car and sat down. The wandering American correspondent was his guest. He could not protect him from the shell fire. He could not prevent it. But he could share the danger. He could share the risk, and so he rode with me the mile until we passed beyond the danger zone. There he gave me another *"bonne chance"* and left me, went back to his shell-cursed town with its ruins and its agonies.

I hope I shall see General Dubois again. I hope it will be on the day when he is made Governor of Strassburg.

### "Nothing That Was Not Beautiful."

As we left Verdun the firing was increasing; it was rolling up like a rising gale; the infantry fire was becoming pronounced; the Germans were beginning an attack upon Le Mort Homme. Just before sunset we passed through the Argonne Forest and came out beyond. On a hill to the north against the sky the monument of Valmy stood out in clear relief, marking the hill where Kellermann had turned back another Prussian army. Then we slipped down into the Plain of Châlons, where other Frenchmen had met and conquered Attila. At dark we halted in Montmirail, where Napoleon won his last victory before his Empire fell. The sound of the guns we had left behind was still in our ears and the meaning of these names in our minds. Presently my French companion said to me: "It is a long time, isn't it?" He meant all the years since the first storm came out of the north, and I think the same thought is in every Frenchman's mind. Then he told me his story.

"I had two boys," he said; "one was taken from me years ago in an accident; he was killed and it was terrible. But the other I gave.

"He was shot, my last boy, up near Verdun, in the beginning of the war. He did not die at once and I went to him. For twenty days I sat beside him in a cellar waiting for him to die. I bought the last coffin in the village, that he might be buried in it, and kept it under my bed. We talked many times before he died, and he told me all he knew of the fight, of the men about him and how they fell.

"My name is finished, but I say to you now that in all that experience there was nothing that was not beautiful." And as far as I can analyze or put in words the impression that I have brought away from France, from the ruin and the suffering and the destruction, I think it is expressed in those words. I have seen nothing that was not beautiful, too, because through all the spirit of France shone clear and bright.